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SUBJECT: ZUMA PUTS AIDS DENIALISM TO REST

¶1. (U) Summary: On October 29, President Jacob Zuma delivered his annual address to the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) under the theme "Together finding solutions to achieving the goal of a better quality of life for all." Zuma highlighted two critical challenges, which have the potential to undermine the country's efforts to achieve a better life for the South African people: the global economic crisis and health care. He said the impact of the economic crisis has been felt by all sectors of society and that government is compelled to do more with less. Zuma also acknowledged that South Africa was not winning the war against HIV/AIDS and that extraordinary measures were needed to combat the disease. By 2011 the government wants a 50 percent drop in the rate of new infections and the extension of the antiretroviral program to 80 percent of those who need it. Zuma's speech is seen as a welcome change from former President Thabo Mbeki's AIDS denialism. End summary.

¶2. (U) On October 29, President Jacob Zuma delivered his annual address to the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) under the theme "Together finding solutions to achieving the goal of a better quality of life for all." During his discussion of the global economic crisis, Zuma said that Finance Minister Gordhan's recent Medium Term Budget Statement presented a government spending program that places the interest of ordinary South Africans at the center of the government's work and that government must do more with less resources. During his address which also focused on health care and more specifically the fight against HIV/AIDS, Zuma acknowledged that South Africa was not winning the war against HIV/AIDS and that extraordinary measures were needed to combat the disease. Zuma indicated that he wanted to use this year's World AIDS Day to mark the beginning of a massive mobilization campaign by government against HIV/AIDS. The President said the campaign should reach all South Africans and must spur them into action to safeguard their health and the health of the nation. He said the South African National AIDS Council, headed by Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe, was expected to develop a set of measures that strengthen the programs already in place, but did not elaborate on how the government will accomplish this enormous task or how they will pay for it. By 2011 the government wants a 50 percent drop in the rate of new infections and the extension of the antiretroviral program to 80 percent of those who need it. He also called for an end to the huge stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. Note: South Africa is regarded as among the countries with the highest number of HIV infections. Some studies suggest that 57 percent of the deaths of children under the age of five during 2007 were a result of HIV. The disease is estimated to kill 1,000 people every day and at least 5.7 million of South Africa's 50 million population are infected. End note.

¶3. (U) Commentators here have described Zuma's speech as a welcome change from the stance adopted by his predecessor Thabo Mbeki. Mbeki drew fierce criticism after coming to power in 1999 when he questioned accepted AIDS science and failed to make life-prolonging antiretroviral drugs widely available. Both political parties and AIDS activists alike have welcomed the Zuma government's new AIDS stance. The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) said Zuma's speech has put an end to AIDS denialism. The TAC welcomed what they referred to as "the ushering in of this new era, almost exactly ten years since former President Mbeki made a speech that began the era of Qformer President Mbeki made a speech that began the era of state-supported denialism." UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidib

congratulated Zuma on his bold leadership. He said, "President Zuma has shown extraordinary vision in prioritizing AIDS as an issue of national importance. His call to end denialism and embark on a national mobilization campaign will save thousands of lives." Mike Waters, the Democratic Alliance's (DA) Shadow Minister for Health said Zuma's speech made a welcome change from a decade of AIDS-denialism that has come to be associated with ANC rule. He said the DA was anxious to be part of the solution in the fight against AIDS and would do its part to monitor the progress of Zuma's commitment. The Independent Democrats John Gunda expressed the hope that Zuma would follow through on his commitment to fight HIV/AIDS.

14. (U) Comment. It is interesting to note that Zuma chose to stress the seriousness of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the same chamber (the NCOP) where Mbeki first articulated his view that HIV did not cause AIDS almost 10 years ago. By doing so the government clearly wants to dispel any lingering doubt that it has reversed the policy of the former Mbeki administration and is now fully committed to the fight against HIV/AIDS. End comment.